

T. Givón: The Genesis of Syntactic Complexity: Diachrony, ontogeny, neuro-cognition, evolution. Amsterdam – Philadelphia: John Benjamins 2009. XVIII + 366 pp. ISBN 978–90–272–3254–0. 36 € (paperback)

The present reviewer recommends not to read this latest book by Givón without knowledge of his previous books, in particular Givón (1995, 2002, 2005). On the one hand, this will make the reading itself easier as some things are repeated; on the other hand, the sense of the text will be clearer in which numerous data from non-linguistic disciplines await the simple linguist regarding which he or she may not be sure, a *prima vista*, what they are doing in a treatise on genesis of complex predicative structures. The reviewer is also presented with the dilemma of whether to try to stuff the rich content of the book into a few paragraphs of his review, or whether not even to begin it, not to deprive the publisher of his profit and to advise the reader to purchase and read the book itself. Since Givón's book offers a manifold edification, I believe the money invested pays great dividends.

This is also why I choose the second option, and instead of an attempt to retell the content, which could have an uncertain result, I have rather elected the form of a few remarks of my own on those points in Givón's exposition that appear most important to me.

With a bit of exaggeration one can say that the majority of what is most important from a general point of view can be found in the preface (pp. XVII–XVIII). Therein, three key areas or concepts are introduced on which is to be based, in Givón's view, the explanation of complex syntactic structures in particular and, of course, of language phenomena in general: diachrony (development of language), ontogeny (acquisition of language) and evolution (genesis of language). All three areas are then linked together by biology as "the true mother discipline of the study of mind, behavior and diversity". The preface also mentions the path through which Givón has arrived at such a view, namely broad empiricism—the confrontation with the strong variability of the described phenomenon across languages. In opposition to linguistics based on the three mentioned pillars stands non-evolutional and exclusively synchronic structuralism, which is not inspired by biology and poses description as explanation.

We observe here two interesting things. First, in such a view—as Harder (1996:297) has remarked on another occasion—Chomskyan generativism is confused with structuralism and its defects are regarded as generally structuralist. Second, we can observe here—so to say—the reductivist fatality of a certain American linguistic tradition: all American linguistic titans who combat each other are always interested only in a particular aspect of language, and to make matters worse they reproach one another with it. Also Givón's idea of what linguistic explanation should look like is one-sided, as it ignores the teleological-instrumentalist, socially-anchored dimension of language and its use. More generally speaking, the case is similar to Darwin's evolution theory: it is nice to know that man evolved from ape, but it is not quite clear of what use such knowledge is in everyday life; actually, it seems to be more important to know how man has to live and act. Likewise, it seems to be more important to know how language functions and is to be used adequately than to know whether it is genetically related to Standard Chimpanzee of North Congo or rather to Colloquial Orangutanian of South Borneo.

It is interesting that a general fundamental view on language is shared by Bloomfieldians, Chomskyans and the new functionalists such as Givón: language is something which is passively observed, described, explained; the so-called practical questions are beyond the horizon (or possibly they represent "secondary and tertiary responses to language", which are ridiculous in eyes of a true linguist; Bloomfield 1944). It is through this view that linguists of these denominations are discreetly linked with neogrammarians, to which also Givón refers, and radically differ from the Praguean functional structuralists (cf. Vykypěl 2009: Ch. 7). It is interesting that, in the case of the new functionalists, the perspective of a more-or-less passive observer exists beside their effort to find the broadest possible cross-linguistic empirical basis; we see a similar situation—in Indo-

Europeanist dimension—with the neogrammarians. It may be asked whether this is an accidental co-occurrence, or whether there is a causal relationship between an excessive inductivism and work with a not-actually-managed amount of empirical data on the one hand, and the passively observational perspective and evolutionist speculations on the other.

Another remarkable feature which is common to the three currents of American linguistics and separates them strongly from European structuralists is the more or less clear identification of language structure with expression. In Givón's book this is, for instance, manifested by his beloved example of the typology of the passive (Ch. 3), which he frequently repeats in his books: he calls "structural" a classification which is based on expression; "functional" is, in turn, a typology based on equivalence of meanings.

Connected to the aforementioned, basically non-instrumentalist view of language is the concept of language types as reflections of the diachronic pathways that gave rise to them; this concept is also repeated in Givón's texts, and we find it in his last book as well (p. 61). From the point of view of, e.g., the Prague School, it must be added, however, that a synchronic type is not only a reflection of developmental pathways that gave rise to it, but it is also a part of a larger whole, the language system—and thus it is a tool of communication. Givón's causal diachronic perspective is not the only explanatory perspective, the only perspective that gives things sense, for the issue is not only to know what a thing has developed from, but also what purpose it serves, i.e., what ends individual parts of language serve and in what way they do so. A theory that is explanatory in a diachronic sense is not the only meaningful theory of synchronic diversity; a meaningful theory of synchronic diversity can also be a theory that can demonstrate the meaning of the diversity of the things to be described, their function, task, functioning in human communication; a theory that clarifies how diverse things can be diversely useful.

These remarks are not intended to mean that Givón should, in his book, also investigate the purpose of the phenomena he deals with—after all, the topic of his book is the genesis of something—nor that he should begin to write on, for instance, how it is possible to intellectualize various nominalization constructions that functionally compete with each other. By what has been said I wish to relativize somewhat the feel of explanatory exclusivity of the perspective adopted by Givón; his apodicticity may irritate a functional structuralist as much as Givón has been irritated by the apodicticity of Chomsky.

My remarks must also not make the kind reader believe that the value of Givón's book is low. Quite the contrary, it is valuable for a broad circle of readers, both linguists, particularly those who are interested in language development, acquisition of language or cognitive linguistics, as well as non-linguists.*

References

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